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Phillips, J. (2015) Contested memories: the Scottish Parliament and the 1984–5 miners' strike. *Scottish Affairs*, 24(2), pp. 187-206.

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Deposited on: 19 May 2015

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Jim Phillips, 'Contested Memories: the Scottish Parliament and the 1984-5 Miners' Strike'

Scottish Affairs, 24.2 (2015), 187-206

Abstract

The miners' strike of 1984-5 is a site of contested memories. A debate in the Scottish Parliament on the 30th anniversary in March 2014 highlighted three particular points of contention: the economics of coal and the social costs of closures; the strategies of the NUM and the UK Conservative government; and the question of restorative justice for victimised strikers. This paper examines these controversies, measuring the perspectives of MSPs against the weight of historical evidence. It explores the moral economy of the Scottish coalfields, where closures in the 1960s and 1970s were agreed by the workforce because meaningful employment alternatives existed. Closures in the 1980s violated this moral economy. The paper demonstrates that the financial costs of producing coal were exaggerated in 1984, while the predicted negative social consequences of not producing coal were accurate. It argues that criticisms of NUM strategy in 1984-5 are outweighed by evidence that the Conservative government was attacking the moral economy, seeking to eliminate union voice from decisions about closures. It comments on the victimisation of strikers in 1984-5, arguing that contemporary calls for restorative justice are resisted by the Scottish government partly because the SNP – reflecting the broader mood in the Scottish Parliament – ignores the political salience of social class.

Key words

Miners' strike; Class; Communities; Scottish Parliament

On 20 March 2014 the Scottish Parliament held a members' business debate to mark the 30th anniversary of the 1984-5 miners' strike. Initiated by Iain Gray, Labour MSP for East Lothian, the debate highlighted competing party political memories of the strike and contrasting interpretations of its legacy (Scottish Parliament, 2014). This article analyses these contested memories. Two concepts from oral history theory are utilised. First, individuals construct or 'compose' memories of personal and public events that are consistent with their internal and often politicised narratives about history (Summerfield, 2000). Second, such personal memory, especially where it is politicised, frequently interacts with a larger social narrative. This is sometimes called the 'cultural circuit'. In speaking about the past individuals are influenced by the social narrative. Wittingly or unconsciously individuals then strengthen this social narrative as they articulate their 'own' memories. As a result other individuals are more likely to shape their recollections with reference to the larger – or hegemonic – social narrative (Thomson, 1998). Social memories are rarely non-contentious, particularly where they relate to historical divisions. 'Memory', wrote Alessandro Portelli, when analysing the history of social and political antagonism in the coalfields of Kentucky, 'is the ultimate site of conflict' (2011: 192).

These theoretical perspectives enrich understanding of the Scottish Parliament's 30th anniversary debate, and memories of the strike more generally in Scotland. MSPs offered politicised characterisations of key events and personalities in the strike that were obviously structured by existing and antonymous social narratives. Three areas of contention stood out: coal closures and their impact on coalfield communities; the competing strategies of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the UK Conservative government; and the

victimisation of strikers, who were sacked during the strike by their employer, the National Coal Board (NCB), in pursuance of government aims, and possibly in concert with the judiciary and the police. This article examines these contested issues, integrating the MSPs' arguments with perspectives and evidence drawn from historical literature and NUM, NCB and government archives, including the minutes of the UK Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal, released under the 30-year rule on 1 January 2014 (CMGC).

In introducing the 30th anniversary debate Ian Gray emphasised that the strike was highly unusual. It was not about wages or changes in working conditions, but the jobs, pits and communities that were threatened by NCB and government plans for a smaller coal sector (29233-5). In Scotland it was also in defence of the broader 'moral economy' of the coalfields. E. P. Thompson used the concept of the moral economy to analyse popular protest in England. It remains a compelling framework of analysis. Thompson's moral economy consisted of popular expectations and customs evolving from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries that were protected by the 'crowd' of plebeian workers and consumers against the profit-seeking behaviour of employers and traders (1971: *passim*). The moral economy of the Scottish coalfields had a shorter genesis. It was rooted in the struggles of the inter-war years, bolstered by the redistribution of wealth and esteem from middle to working class that applied generally in post-1945 Britain (McKibbin, 1999: 161), and consolidated by coal industry nationalisation in 1947. The moral economy was dynamic, but had two long-term features: strategic decisions, including those relating to pit closures, were taken jointly by management and union representatives; and closures were only ratified where the economic security of miners and their communities was preserved. In the 1960s employment in Scotland's pits more than halved, but economic activity in the

coalfields was stable. Miners of working age who wished to remain in the industry could usually do so, moving voluntarily to pits nearby. Substantial numbers of new jobs were also created, chiefly through UK government regional policy incentives that persuaded manufacturers – many in electrical engineering and other consumer goods industries – to move operations to the mining areas of Fife, Lanarkshire and the Lothians. This brought new employment opportunities for coalfield women as well as men. Political and managerial changes in 1979-80, specifically the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in the UK and in Scotland the appointment of Albert Wheeler as NCB Area Chairman, placed this moral economy under severe pressure, and it was dismantled altogether after the strike (Phillips, 2013).

Coal Closures, Class and 'Communities'

The only Conservative MSP in the chamber for the Parliament's debate on 20 March, which immediately followed First Minister's Questions, was Murdo Fraser, of Mid Scotland and Fife. Fraser defended the UK Conservative government's approach to the coal industry in the 1980s. Pit closures and redundancies were regrettable but necessary, given the unsustainably high losses of producing coal in Scotland, 'nearly £14 on every tonne' (29277).

Fraser's narrative was structured by the larger Thatcherite view of British and Scottish industry in the 1970s and 1980s, with coal as a particularly poor performer, imprisoned by the alleged inefficiencies of public ownership and trade union 'control' (Dorey, 2013). The Thatcher governments were keen to accelerate the trend in UK energy policy since the 1950s, promoting greater use of gas, oil and nuclear power and further

reducing coal's share of electricity-generation. The 1980 Coal Industry Act proposed ending public subsidy to the NCB by 1984, with the clear threat that all 'unprofitable' collieries would close. This was a highly contentious initiative in the early 1980s, amid recession and deindustrialisation, with limited employment alternatives for redundant miners and contracting business demand for electricity as big energy-users like steel and car manufacturing shrunk in scale (Ashworth, 1986: 418-19). It was also highly politicised and partial: the government rejected 'subsidy' to coal while offering increased state 'investment' in nuclear energy (Fothergill, 1988), and loosening the tax regime for multinationals operating in the North Sea (Woolfson et al, 1998: 36). The miners threatened a national strike in 1981 and the government temporarily retreated from the ambition of a subsidy-free coal industry within three or four years. Ministers nevertheless encouraged the NCB to build up coal reserves and pressed the publicly-owned power generators to lower domestic consumer and business charges through increased oil burn and coal imports. The government then pursued cost control through another route, appointing the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) to examine NCB finances.

Fraser's £14 per tonne average may be derived from the MMC's 1983 report. Based on NCB data, this concluded that all coal was produced at an official loss in Scotland. The NCB's financial calculations, however, were highly problematic, incorporating expenditure on activities that had no direct bearing on production. These included high interest payments to the government on capital loans, which at 6.3 per cent per annum were twice the average rate for nationalised industry, along with compensation for subsidence, pensions to retired employees and payments to redundant miners (Glyn, 1988). Critics of the MMC findings also reported that performance itself was highly subjective, and varied

according to investment. There was a close correlation between pits with high levels of investment and those with 'good' production records (Cutler et al, 1998).

So the 'loser' narrative was highly dubious. Fraser's reference to an overall Scottish average loss of £14 per tonne adds further confusion to the picture, overlooking substantial pit-level differences in performance. About 7 million tonnes were produced in Scotland in 1982. Some 28 per cent of this output came from the Longannet complex of pits in West Fife and Kincardine, feeding the giant South of Scotland Electricity Board power station, where losses were rated by the MMC at just £1.50 per tonne. At the three other largest producers, Bilston Glen and Monktonhall in Midlothian, and Seafield in East Fife, in each case representing about 12-13 per cent of overall production in Scotland, losses per tonne ranged from £4.60 to £8.70 (MMC: Appendix 3.5 (a)). Hence 28 per cent of Scottish coal in the early 1980s was being produced at pits where the official losses were marginal and another 37 per cent at pits where losses were considerably lower than Fraser's £14 a tonne, and remembering that these losses were in any case probably exaggerated.

From this it can be concluded that the economic case for closures in Scotland, as elsewhere in Britain, was not clear cut. It was further challenged in 1983-4 by those who emphasised the social costs of 'non-production', with redundancy payments followed by unemployment maintenance, coupled with lost multiplier effects in coalfield areas (Glyn). Gloomy predictions of entrenched unemployment and poverty in the Scottish coalfields were borne out by the material consequences of closures, which swiftly followed the defeat of the strike. Eleven of the remaining fourteen pits were closed on economic grounds between 1986 and 1990, and deep mining in Scotland ended twelve years later. Roseanna Cunningham, the SNP government's Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs

(29235), referred in the debate to the strike's 'toxic legacy of unemployment'. In the 2000s and early 2010s joblessness in all ex-coalfield communities remained above the Scottish and UK averages, accompanied by engrained social deprivation (Perchard, 2013). A crude but telling indicator of this was provided in the Scottish Parliament by Alex Rowley, Labour MSP for Cowdenbeath, who observed that 50 per cent of children in primaries 1-3 in the ex-mining village of Ballingry were eligible for free school meals in 2014 (29227).

Fraser objected to the criticism that primary responsibility for these closures and their legacy should be borne by the Thatcher governments. He said that 172 mines disappeared in the UK under the Labour governments of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan in the 1960s and 1970s, exceeding the 154 that closed in the 1980s. This is ostensibly true, but it should be remembered that closures before 1979 were secured within the moral economy framework: they were agreed jointly by representatives of management and the workforce, and permitted only because alternative employment existed to guarantee the economic security of coalfield communities. The example of Fife, Scotland's largest coalfield terrain after the Second World War, shows how this moral economy operated. From 1951 to 1971 the number of Fife men employed in coal fell from 24,111 to 8,040, but there was no contraction in the overall number of economically active persons: just over 130,000 in each year. There was a particular increase in the female share of industrial employment, chiefly in electrical engineering, as US firms were established – via UK regional policy incentives – in the New Town of Glenrothes. Relatively few closures followed in the 1970s, either in Fife or Scotland generally, and this was partly because the rate of alternative job creation decelerated (Phillips, 2013: 104–5).

The closures of the 1980s, initiated by Albert Wheeler, NCB Scottish Area Director, to lower production costs, were fundamentally different. Starting at Kinneil in West Lothian in 1982, and continuing in 1983 with Cardowan in Lanarkshire, plus Sorn and Highhouse in Ayrshire, these transgressed the moral economy. They were pushed through against union and workforce opposition (Phillips, 2012: 54-64), and in the inhospitable broader economic environment of deindustrialisation, recession, and escalating unemployment (Peden, 2012: 654-62). Wheeler's strategy included evading or abandoning existing joint industrial agreements at other pits: miners were sent home from shifts without pay; their representatives were harassed and bullied. This provoked a sequence of local strikes and lock-outs in 1983 and the early months of 1984. So widespread were the effects of this strategy that about 50 per cent of Scotland's miners were already in dispute with local management when the national strike began in March 1984 (Brotherstone and Pirani, 2005: *passim*).

The significance of these tensions *within* the Scottish area of the NCB was ignored in the Parliamentary debate. There was emphasis instead on the strike as an external imposition on people, workplaces and communities in Scotland by the Conservative government and the national leadership of the NUM, approximately represented by the divergent personalities and politics of Margaret Thatcher and Arthur Scargill, elected union President in 1982. Adam Ingram, SNP MSP for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, praised the courage of Ayrshire miners and the solidarity of the 'working people of Scotland', which he contrasted with 'the single-mindedness of the most brutal and pitiless British leader since Cromwell' and 'the cowardice and hypocrisy' of the Labour Party (29225-6). Fraser, having disputed the charges against Thatcher, blamed the eventual closures and job losses

on Scargill, ‘a demagogue’ who ‘misled’ the miners in pursuit of his core ‘ideological objective’, namely ‘bringing down the elected Government of the day’ (29228).

Ingram’s reference to ‘working people’ was an example of how participants in the debate avoided discussion of social class divisions, whether in Scotland or the UK more broadly. Paterson et al have noted that an increasing proportion of Scots identified themselves as working class in the closing decades of the 20th century, when in occupational structure terms the relative size of the manual working class was actually decreasing (2004: 80-104). This can be related to recent Scottish economic and political history, including the ‘civic Scotland’ narrative of the 1980s and 1990s, with Thatcherism as an external attack on various elements of Scottish economic and social life, including communal solidarity, the public sector and industrial employment (Gibbs, 2014). In an example of the ‘cultural circuit’ in operation, these elements – each associated with working class life and identity – then assumed a greater centrality in discussions about how Scottish national identity was distinct in the 21st century. At the same time, however, class as an economic, social and political identifier is rarely explicit in this mainstream public discourse. It hardly appears at all, for instance, in the Scottish Government’s 2013 White Paper, *Scotland’s Future*, even in passages on inequalities in employment, social protection, and housing and communities (Scottish Government, 2013: 103-9, 150-169).

The complex inter-play of class and nation was evident too in the 2014 Independence Referendum campaign. Both sides tried to mobilise working class voters, but appealed to them in highly coded terms. The Yes campaign spoke about its attachment to ‘fairness’ and ‘justice’, and key figures, notably Nicola Sturgeon, Deputy First Minister in the Scottish government, referred to their own working class origins or background. The Better

Together campaign, especially in the climactic fortnight preceding the vote on 18 September, pressed themes of 'solidarity' and 'unity' with the rest of the United Kingdom. Labour leaders, long given to talking about 'hard working families' or 'hard working people' rather than the 'working class', were prominent in this campaigning. The Better Together television broadcast on 8 September 2014, featuring Gordon Brown, the former Labour Prime Minister, included archive images of male and female manual workers engaged in industrial activity and – another coded working class reference – in hospital settings, reinforcing the ostensible message that the Union was vital to stable employment and a National Health Service operating in the public good. On the same evening as this broadcast, 8 September, Gordon Brown set out a timetable for strengthening the powers of the Scottish Parliament in the event of a No vote on 18 September. He did so at Loanhead Miners' Welfare and Social Club in Midlothian (Carrell and Wintour, 2014), a mile or so from the former site of Bilston Glen Colliery. This was a highly ambiguous situation in class terms. The miners' club, a traditional centre in the coalfields of working class educational, cultural and recreational life, was providing a platform for advocacy of the Union, the political governors of which in the 1980s had used public policy to dismantle the material and industrial basis of the organised working class (Jones, 2012: 35-7, 48-9, 54-5, 188-9).

In similarly ambiguous ways SNP and some Labour MSPs used various codes in the 30th anniversary debate to evade reference to the class dimensions of the strike. SNP members in particular spoke of the strike as an attack by the Conservative government on 'communities' (29233, 29235), or, in the words of Jamie Hepburn, MSP for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, 'on the values of those around me and those that I hold now' (29229). Labour members also emphasised the strike's connections with 'communities', rather than the

working class (29226-7, 29234). 'Community' is, of course, a conventional and generally useful term for capturing localised and bounded interests and loyalties. But its meaning can be elusive, masking differences within localities, whether of class, gender or ethnicity (Gilbert: 10-16). Labour MSPs offered 'composed' narratives on this matter, emphasising the solidarity of mining communities in 1984-5 without reference to their divisions, including those arising from the incidence of strike-breaking which developed at a small number of pits, notably Bilston Glen. Labour MSPs were also generally reluctant to speak explicitly about class. Only Neil Findlay, Labour MSP for Lothian, used the specific qualifier of social class in relation to the strike, albeit indirectly, when describing the NUM leadership in 1984 as the 'political inspiration' for his then teenage self:

They were clever and articulate working-class men leading the fight for jobs, working in partnership with principled, organised, intelligent and determined women, who provided the campaign's backbone, drive and energy (29231-2).

So the strike involved *working class* people, organised in predominantly working class communities, and politicised by coalfield moral economy arguments and assumptions. These people and communities were struggling to preserve trade union voice in the workplace and economic security in the coalfields, defending the pits and the jobs that were jeopardised by government and NCB plans for the industry's shrinkage. The vital role of women, as joint leaders and not 'just' loyal supporters of the strike, was commended by Gray as well as Findlay (29224), and is worth brief elaboration. Those who breached the

picket lines were stigmatised locally in gendered terms as inferior types of men: 'weak' individuals, degenerate alcoholics, inveterate gamblers and generally poor workers, saved in many instances from dismissal before the strike by their union representatives. Women played a key role in vilifying strike-breakers and strike-breaking, elevating its social costs. (Stead, 1987: 68-75). More tangibly women reduced the economic costs of striking, with their earnings from employment, and energetic and skilful management of community-based strike centres. They shared the political campaigning with men, in Scotland as elsewhere, and sustained the strike morally and materially for just over a year (Spence and Stephenson, 2009).

Competing NUM and UK government strategies

The NUM's strategy in 1984-5 has recently been criticised in *Scottish Affairs* by Bob Eadie (2014), on three grounds: there was no national ballot in advance of the strike, which weakened its legitimacy; picketing of the Ravenscraig steel mill in Lanarkshire and other important economic units was counter-productive, jeopardising the employment of other workers and hence narrowing the basis of wider labour movement and social support for the miners; and a settlement with the NCB, preserving pits and jobs, could have been achieved had Michael McGahey, NUM Scottish Area President and NUM Vice President, been NUM President rather than Scargill. Peter Ackers, revisiting discussions about the strike in 1984-5 within the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), has made a similar set of criticisms. Without a national ballot the federal structure of the union was deployed, so that its distinct constituents, such as the NUM Scottish Area, used area procedures to declare area strikes. Areas on strike then attempted to 'persuade' other areas to join, in the

first instance through picketing pits where miners continued working. This led to disorder, initially at working mines in Nottinghamshire, but later also at pits in Scotland, and at steel mills and other economic pinch points. As a result the NUM was isolated politically, inhibiting the construction and mobilisation of broader anti-Conservative government forces in defence of miners' jobs. Ackers adds that retreat should have been attempted by the NUM, engaging with the NCB case for closures and accepting some losses. This would have postponed coalfield deindustrialisation and the attendant miseries of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion (2014).

These issues are complex and remain divisive. The NUM rationalised the absence of a national ballot in 1984-5 on the basis that the question of coal closures did not affect all miners equally, and it would be unfair for securely-employed men to vote less securely-employed men out of their jobs (Beynon, 1985: 12-13). At Ravenscraig the NUM reached an agreement with rail and steel unions to ration coal supply to the British Steel Corporation (BSC) works, allowing the furnaces to stay lit but preventing production, as a means of exerting political pressure on the government. BSC management broke this embargo by organising large-scale road supply of imported coal from its Hunterston terminal on the Clyde, which huge NUM pickets in the first week of May were designed to block. In the Scottish Parliament Findlay criticised the policing of Ravenscraig (29231), but otherwise this important episode and the ballot controversy were only indirectly alluded to. Cunningham stated that 'miners chose their democratic right to strike because of the significant job losses that were occurring' (29235), while Fraser referred to the alleged public 'disapproval of the methods used by the miners' in 1984, and their 'irresponsible' nature (29228).

Criticism of Scargill and the NUM's negotiating strategy was, however, more explicitly examined, first by Fraser (29228), and then by Christine Grahame, SNP MSP for Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale (29232-4). Fraser said that Scargill's inflexibility in a sequence of inconclusive peace talks with NCB representatives, held at different locations between June and September, left the government 'with little room for manoeuvre'. Grahame followed this line of argument, claiming that the NUM President had 'walked into a well-planned Tory trap', with the strike 'called at the height of summer, when coal stocks were at their highest'. This was factually incorrect, in two ways: the strike was not 'called' by Scargill, but grew organically in Scotland in response to NCB management's anti-union strategy; and it developed over the course of the winter of 1983-4, officially commencing in March and not the summer. Grahame also articulated, at length, the counter-factual ventured by Eadie in *Scottish Affairs*:

If Mick McGahey had been given a greater role at the time, perhaps the history of the trade union movement and Tory privatisation would have been different. If he had led, with his better understanding of the strategy required and the essence of right timing, and being more personable, eloquent and persuasive to the public than Scargill, I do not think that the humiliation of the miners and the subsequent rampage of privatisation would have been so easily won.

This is a popular strand of coalfield memory. David Hamilton, NUM delegate for Monktonhall Colliery in 1984 and Labour MP for Midlothian since 2001, told the author in

2009 that 'Mick would have found a mechanism' for ending the strike 'honourably', preserving pits and jobs by agreement. When asked to specify what such 'mechanism' would have been Hamilton humorously and self-deprecatingly contrasted his own alleged shortcomings with McGahey's greater intelligence and cunning: 'I don't know, but Mick would have found a way through it'. A similar view was articulated by several other strike participants in 2009, including Willie Clarke and Iain Chalmers, both of Seafield, and Eric Clarke, NUM Scottish Area Secretary (Phillips, 2012: 86).

The precise origins of the 'McGahey as NUM President' counter-factual are unclear, although the workings of the cultural circuit can be discerned. Scargill was persistently vilified in the media on ideological as well as personal grounds (Philo, 1989: *passim*), and in retirement continues to attract hostile press coverage (Harris, 2014). As pertinently, however, there were also discrete criticisms of Scargill during and immediately after the strike from within the NUM. Ackers has detailed these, in his examination of Communist Party of Great Britain discussions in 1984-5. Much of this dissent was articulated by NUM officials from South Wales and Scotland, including George Bolton, Scottish Area Vice President, although McGahey himself never publicly criticised Scargill. This internal Communist and NUM murmuring contributed to the growth of the anti-Scargill narrative, within the labour movement and in society more broadly. It clearly emboldened Neil Kinnock, Labour Party leader, who was close politically and by Parliamentary constituency to the NUM in South Wales, to attack Scargill with increasing ferocity in the years following the strike (Milne, 2014: 247-53).

The question nevertheless remains: what would McGahey have done to settle the strike by agreement? The government was, after all, committed to defeating the strike,

expending enormous resources to achieve this end. In the summer of 1984 Nigel Lawson, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, said that the economic and financial costs of the strike were a 'worthwhile investment'. Including lost production and tax revenues, replacement coal stocks and additional oil burn charges, reduced economic activity, and the huge policing charges, these costs amounted to around £6 billion, or £14 billion at 2014 prices. This sum exceeds the NCB's pre-strike projected losses across England, Wales and Scotland for the financial year of 1984–5, about £105 million, by a factor of *sixty to one* (Phillips, 2012: 53, 146).

What was the government seeking to obtain from this investment? The priority in the coal dispute, it must be emphasised, was eliminating trade union voice from the industry, particularly in relation to high-order strategic questions like closures (Phillips, 2014). The government saw this as central to its larger ambition of redistributing economic resources and social authority from employees to employers, to liberate business and management, and strengthen market forces (Gamble, 1994: *passim*). This narrowed greatly the NUM's scope for effective action, including a negotiated settlement that left meaningful remnants of the industry intact. Ned Smith, NCB industrial relations director, argued in his memoirs that such an outcome was prevented by his boss, Ian MacGregor, the NCB Chairman, operating under government instruction (127–8). NUM Scottish Area records demonstrate that McGahey also believed that the government was instructing MacGregor to block a settlement (NUMSA: 15 October 1984). Minutes of the Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal (CMGC), recently released under the 30-year rule, show that Smith and McGahey were correct. Thatcher told the CMGC in May that the NCB's 'negotiating brief' would have to be 'clearly delineated', meaning that an agreement must only be secured where the NUM

accepted that pits would be closed on economic grounds, and that the NCB would have the ultimate authority to effect closures where such grounds existed (CMGC: 30 May 1984).

Before talks in July she reaffirmed this position: 'it was important that the terms [of any resolution] should be seen to permit the closures sought by the NCB before the strike' (CMGC: 11 July 1984). In advance of negotiations resuming in September she insisted that the 'most important requirement would be an agreement that would not in any way fetter the NCB in arranging the closure, as and when necessary, of uneconomic pits' (CMGC: 12 September 1984).

Thatcher was seeking to establish managerial sovereignty in the coal industry, to over-ride the joint-regulatory mechanisms and moral economy assumptions that had shaped coalfield development, including the carefully-managed process of contraction since the 1960s. It is difficult to see how an agreement providing the NCB with unilateral powers to determine future closures could have been acceptable to the striking miners. McGahey understood this. The July talks, for example, foundered on the NCB's insistence on the word 'beneficially': pits would be shut down when their reserves could no longer be 'beneficially developed'. McGahey said that 'beneficially' had an 'economic connotation': 'if a colliery was not beneficial in terms of profits, it was not economically viable', so the NCB would close it. The NUM could not accept this, he stated, 'rejecting any concept of uneconomic closures, this being the basic, fundamental and central question of the whole dispute' (NUMSA: 23 July 1984). The evidence from the Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal files plainly outweighs the arguments articulated in the Scottish Parliament debate: attempts to secure a negotiated settlement were blocked by the government's disabling opposition rather than Scargill's intransigence; and McGahey could not have supported the removal of

union voice from decisions about closures, which was the only form of 'agreement' allowable by the government.

The Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal files also qualify the argument that the NUM's targeting of Ravenscraig was misguided. The threatened cessation of production certainly troubled steel workers and other potential supporters of the strike, but importantly it also placed substantial pressure on the government. This was vital, given the absence of other meaningful sources of political traction for the striking miners, with coal stocks at power stations in April 1984 promising endurance of electricity supply well into 1985 (CMGC: 12 April 1984). Norman Tebbit, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, viewed coal shortages at Ravenscraig as the government's outstanding economic difficulty at the end of April, threatening a halt to production that would endanger supply to a range of industrial customers (CMGC: 30 April 1984). This pressure was intensified by the NUM's squeeze on road supply in the week that followed, with a combined force of 3,000 pickets at Ravenscraig and Hunterston on 7 May. Scottish Office thinking at this point was that production at Ravenscraig would cease altogether within three days (Phillips, 2012: 95).

On 8 May the Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal discussed the crisis, examining why Scottish chief constables had not replicated the practice followed in England of stopping pickets on the open road, preventing them from reaching their targets. Thatcher directed George Younger, the Secretary of State for Scotland, to ask this specific question of Scottish chief constables, using public order legislation 'to prevent pickets going to the scene of possible disturbances' (CMGC: 8 May). The effect was immediate. On 10 May officers of Strathclyde Police halted 290 miners from West Fife, Clackmannan and Stirlingshire on the A80 at Stepps, many miles from Ravenscraig and Hunterston. There were dozens of arrests,

with miners held for several hours at different police stations in Glasgow. Thatcher's highly irregular intervention – micro-managing the policing of the strike in Scotland – had a decisive bearing on events, as the NUM Scottish Area, confronted by the new situation, suspended its opposition to large-scale rail transport of coal to Ravenscraig on 11 May.

Victimisation and Justice

The police action during the Ravenscraig crisis is an important element in the third area of contention examined in the Scottish Parliament on 20 March 2014: the victimisation of striking miners and the campaign for restorative justice for those wrongfully arrested during the strike, and consequently dismissed from employment by the NCB. This represented a major political division between Labour and other parties in Holyrood, including the SNP government, and brings the question of social class – raised earlier in the discussion of communities – back into focus. Class is politically problematic for all mainstream political parties seeking the widest possible electoral mandate, including Labour, and even when examining historical events like the 1984-5 strike. Among Labour MSPs, it will be remembered, only Neil Findlay framed his comments around the working class nature of the strike. But SNP members in 2014 seemed particularly reluctant to think about class as a factor in 1984-5, and specifically rejected the argument that the strike was a major site of anti-working class injustice. This is partly because they are responsible, as the governing party, for devolved matters of policing and justice. It may also reflect the disinclination of SNP ministers – reflecting the broader mood in the Scottish Parliament – to accept the political salience of social class.

The victimisation of strikers – by police, the courts and the NCB – was a general phenomenon across the British coalfields in 1984-5. Press and media coverage in the 2010s has focused on South Yorkshire Police, where the seeming organisation of fabricated evidence by officers in relation to the 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disaster was apparently prefaced by similar malpractice in the miners' strike. There are strong suggestions that senior officers orchestrated the falsification of evidence against dozens of NUM members at Orgreave in South Yorkshire, the BSC coke depot and scene of intensive picketing and policing in May and June 1984 (Conn, 2012). Findlay claimed in the Scottish Parliament that there were analogous problems in the policing of the strike in Scotland (29231), contributing to a proportionally higher level of victimisation than in England and Wales. Some 206 Scottish miners, 1.5 per cent of the strikers, were sacked, compared with about 800 or 0.6 per cent of the strikers in England and Wales (Hutton, 2005: 57).

Findlay made reference to a number of individual miscarriages of justice in Scotland in 1984-5, with each instance pointing to collusion between police officers and the NCB (29231-2). Trade union activists and officials were apparently targeted on picket lines and in communities, and arrested for alleged public order offences. Cunningham, speaking for the Scottish government, acknowledged that individual injustices may have taken place, and encouraged ex-miners with complaints to use the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission or the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner (29236-7). Fraser, defending the record of the Conservative government, likewise claimed that ex-miners should utilise these existing mechanisms to pursue individual grievances (29228). This seemed to miss the point that miners were victimised systematically, in order to break their collective resolve. Gray articulated this argument, when supporting Findlay's call for a

general investigation of how justice was pursued during the strike: 'It was a strategic approach to policing ... which is why the cases warrant a collective review of how those miners came to be victimised' (29236).

There was indeed a very strong sense in 1984-5 that policing, together with the broader criminal justice system, was used as an instrument of discipline against the striking miners. On 23 May 1984 George Younger met a delegation of Labour MPs, led by Donald Dewar, who were protesting about the mobilisation of the police to break the strike, in defence of the narrow aims of government rather than the broader interests of society. Younger obfuscated, claiming that the government was not instructing the police on picketing, at Ravenscraig or anywhere else in Scotland. Like Cunningham and Fraser in 2014 he suggested that miners who felt wronged by the police – either when stopped on the open road, their freedom of movement curtailed, or when picketing – should pursue the matter through the courts. Alex Eadie, MP for Midlothian, an ex-Fife miner, former Labour government energy minister and in 1984 chair of the mining group of MPs at Westminster, robustly criticised this position from a class perspective. His constituents did not trust in the neutrality of the legal system, he said, and in any case could not pursue legal action against the police because the costs of doing so were prohibitively high. Eadie also spoke about the social costs of the government's political policing. 'He could not stress strongly enough', Younger's officials noted, 'the damage which was being done to the police relationship with the country. If this suffers we all suffer' (Policing of the Miners' Dispute, 1984).

The Labour Party developed this theme after the strike, with a report by Merlyn Rees, Shadow Home Secretary, and Gordon Brown, then MP for Dunfermline East, on the coalfield tensions between police and public. This report positioned the strike within the

wider phenomenon of public disorder shaped by declining industrial employment, rising joblessness and the emergent 'divisive society'. Rees and Brown recommended a Royal Commission on the relationship between police authorities, chief constables and government, with a view to new legislation, along with a major inquiry – on the lines of the Scarman inquiry on the policing of the inner-city riots of 1981 – into the policing of the strike itself (Labour Party, 1985). Government materials released in 2014 show that Labour was correct to suspect that policing and the operation of the justice system more broadly were working against the miners. Ministers in the Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal, including Michael Ancram, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Scottish Office, made reference to pressing the Procurators Fiscal to accelerate cases against miners as a means of disciplining and discouraging the generality of strikers (4 September 1984). Subsequent penalties for picket-line offences were typically four or five times higher than for other public order offences. Once arrested, moreover, men were summarily dismissed by the NCB, and refused reinstatement even where charges were subsequently dropped or convictions not secured. Hence the course of action proposed by Cunningham and Fraser in 2014, that wronged miners seek restitution through the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission or the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner, would have limited practical effect. Being victimised entailed more than criminal charges and possible conviction. Arrested men, to reiterate, whether prosecuted and convicted or not, lost their coal industry jobs, incurred substantial financial debts and sometimes experienced personal difficulties as a result, including marital and family breakdown. Those made redundant in this manner found it even more difficult than other ex-miners to gain alternative work. There is evidence that many of the victimised were secretly black-listed by anti-trade union employers because of

their strike activism, further distancing the prospect of gainful employment, particularly in relatively well-paid manual sectors (Phillips, 2012: 169).

This pattern of events amplified the scale of class injustice experienced by the strikers in Scotland. The apparent collaboration between police and NCB was sharply illuminated by a curious incident in Ayrshire in the autumn of 1984, when the first strike-breaker was brought to Killoch Colliery on a bus from New Cumnock. Police officers on the bus brought it to a halt outside the colliery, and invited on board six strikers, who wanted to speak to the strike-breaker. The officers then commanded the bus to move off with the strikers, into the pit yard. The New Cumnock man did not turn back, but three of the strikers were subsequently dismissed by the NCB for trespass (Phillips, 2012: 150). The pattern of victimisation was part of the wider anti-union NCB strategy within Scotland which preceded the strike, and intensified afterwards. This was 'class struggle from above', to use Ralph Miliband's telling phrase (1989: 115-66), as Wheeler and his officials down-graded joint industrial regulation, in the context of the Conservative government's broader attack on the moral economy of employment security and trade union influence in the workplace and policy-making. The Scottish government was unwilling in 2014 to examine the systematic basis of this victimisation of trade unionists, or see that policing and the justice system more generally in 1984-5 were used to discipline the working class. This will disappoint the victimised ex-miners and their many supporters, but is perhaps consistent with the mainstream political silence on the inequalities and injustices of social class in contemporary Scotland.

Conclusion

The Scottish Parliament's debate on the 30th anniversary of the miners' strike illuminated the importance of 'composure' and the 'cultural circuit' in generating individual and public memories. MSPs mobilised and reinforced existing strike narratives that were consistent with their larger political narratives. Hence the SNP members positioned the strike as an external imposition on Scotland, keen as they apparently were to de-emphasise Scotland's internal social fissures. Labour members, constructing narratives of social solidarity within coalfield communities, avoided specific reference to the painful and 'discomposing' fact of strike-breaking. Substantial politicised divisions clearly still exist: on the economics of coal and the social costs of pit closures; the strategies of the NUM and the UK Conservative government; and, above all perhaps, on the question of restorative justice for victimised strikers. This article placed these controversies in the context of historical argument and evidence. It showed the importance of the moral economy of the Scottish coalfields. Closures in the 1960s and 1970s were acceptable because moral economy criteria were satisfied: they were negotiated between representatives of the NCB and industry trade unions; and agreed because the economic security of coalfield communities was maintained through the provision of widening employment alternatives. Closures in the 1980s violated this moral economy: they were settled by managerial fiat, against trade union and workforce opposition; and they took place in an environment of deindustrialisation and recession, with redundant miners forced into unemployment and communities bereft of economic stability.

Closures in the 1980s were rationalised by arguments about the financial costs of producing coal. This article has shown that these costs were exaggerated, while the predicted negative social consequences of not producing coal – community destabilisation

and embedded poverty – were broadly accurate. The strike was designed to prevent this eventuality. NUM strategy in 1984-5 has been criticised, particularly for the absence of a national strike ballot and the arguably inflexible negotiating position when attempting to reach a settlement with the NCB. But these criticisms are obviated by evidence that the Conservative government destabilised the NUM-NCB negotiations in order to eliminate trade union voice from decisions about closures. The victimisation of strikers – the arrests, convictions, dismissals and covert employment black-listings – were part of the general ‘class struggle from above’, and central to the Conservative government’s broader anti-trade union strategy of the 1980s. Victimisation remains a live issue in the 2010s, but calls for restorative justice for the wronged men and their families are hampered by the Scottish government’s reluctance to countenance social class as a salient political factor.

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